

Mayflower Cemetery tour sheds light on 19th century

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On Saturday, over 20 residents visited the graves of six men who made their mark on 19th century Duxbury. Carolyn Ravenscroft, Duxbury Rural and Historical Society archivist, brought attendees back to times when Duxbury was the center of shipbuilding, a depressed town where many residents relied on shoemaking to make ends meet, the landing site for the French Atlantic cable and a sought-after vacation destination. The tour, "They Came... They Stayed... They Changed Duxbury," was sponsored by the DR& HS. It took place at the Mayflower Cemetery, which despite its name, is not where the Pilgrims are buried. Many are buried at the Chestnut Street cemetery, according to Ravenscroft. The first stop on the tour was the grave of Robert James Needham (1838-1927), which is closest to the parking lot yet out of chronological order. His reason for coming to town was when the French Atlantic cable was being laid from Brest, France to Duxbury in 1869. Needham was a trained cable operator and arrived in town from Liverpool, England. "He was a fascinating and highly intelligent man, who began working as a telegraph operator at the age of 13," reported Ravenscroft. Needham worked in England, Egypt, Tripoli, Malta, New York and Germany before arriving in Duxbury.

"Needham had to be the best of the best, because one mistake on his part would have had far reaching effects," she said. "As an operator, he sat in a dark room and watched for flickers of light coming from an instrument that reflected dots and dashes coming in like little sparks. He would yell to the clerk in the next room where messages would be transcribed."

Needham and his wife, Sarah Welch, raised their six children on St. George St. She died when she was 39, while he lived to be 92.

The second stop on the tour highlighted Duxbury's great ship building era. Spencer Winsor (1779-1835) was the grandson of the first Winsor to come to Duxbury, Samuel Winsor, Sr. During this time, sea captains would head down the eastern seaboard to get raw materials – like cotton or rice – to trade in Europe. It usually took days or even weeks for the cargo to be ready once they arrived in port, said Ravenscroft, "so the crew got to know people in the southern parts." While he was in North Carolina waiting for his ship's cargo, Spencer met Charlotte (Howitt) Winsor. Charlotte was from a well-off slaveholding family in Edenton, N.C. and she became the first of four Howitt sisters to marry Winsors. After they married in 1801, Spencer Winsor brought her and her sister, Patsy, back to Duxbury and built a house

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at 18 Winsor St. Patsy married his brother John in 1803. The other Howitt sisters eventually joined Charlotte and Patsy and, in 1814, Betsy married Spencer's cousin, Isaac Winsor. Three years later, sister Lydia married Lewis Winsor.

“Between all the marriages, there were 24 Winsor-Howitt children born in Duxbury between 1801 and 1830,” Ravenscroft said. “In 1835, however, tragedy struck when Spencer and four of his 13 children died of typhus.” Two years later, Charlotte lost two more of her children.

Buried in Mayflower Cemetery are Spencer, Charlotte, their son Spencer T. and daughter Lucy, who was the last of their children to die in 1940. Ravenscroft noted that there is also an unnamed baby, so it is possible that they actually had 14 children, even though there is no record of the baby.

Rufus Hathaway’s (1770-1822) grave was next on the tour. A self-taught artist-turned-doctor from Freetown, Hathaway began his career in 1790 as an itinerant painter until he was drawn to stay in Duxbury by the lure of portrait commissions in a prosperous community.

“Back then, people would prove they had ‘made it’ by having a portrait done,” explained Ravenscroft, “so Duxbury was the perfect place for Rufus to make a lot of money.”

Hathaway fell in love with Judith Winsor as he painted her portrait, and the feeling was mutual. They married in 1795, but her father, Joshua, was not happy about Hathaway’s profession, according to Ravenscroft. So, Hathaway decided to study medicine and apprenticed with a doctor in Marshfield. He eventually became Duxbury’s only doctor.

Rufus and Judith Hathaway had 12 children and lived on Washington St. He continued to paint all through his life and even carved the eagle in the arch over the Bluefish River Bridge. According to family legend, said Ravenscroft, Hathaway had a fabulous sense of humor and may have even coined the term “King Caesar.” Rufus died of a hernia in 1822 after lifting a patient, rumored to be Ezra Weston. He left his wife and children with little over 700 pounds. Judith lived to be 102. His grave reads: “Thousands

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Carolyn Ravenscroft adds a human dimension when discussing Robert Needham, the telegraph operator for the French Atlantic Cable company. Originally from Liverpool, Needham began working as a telegraph operator at age 13.

Photo by Mary Schiess

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of journeys night and day; I've travelled weary on my way; To heal the sick, but now I'm gone;
A journey never to return."

One of Ravenscroft's "favorite people" in the Mayflower Cemetery was next on the tour: Davey Meehan (1838-1909). Meehan came to Duxbury in 1853 from Ireland when he was 15 and apprenticed with Abel Arnold as a shoemaker.

"Shoemaking was a boring and laborious job that many people in town did at this time," said Ravenscroft. "It was not lucrative, but it kept this town going during those lean years after the great shipbuilding era was over."

Duxbury's participation in the shipbuilding industry ended in the mid-19th century when the ships needed for commerce became too big for Duxbury's shallow waters; eventually even these ships were replaced as a means of transportation by steamships and trains.

Meehan had a big personality and married Laura Alden in 1859. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, he already had a two-year-old and another child on the way, so he thought he had too many responsibilities to enlist. G.B. Weston was in charge of getting 100 men from Duxbury to enlist, however, and heard that 16 young men in town said they would only enlist if Davey Meehan did.

"G.B. Weston heard about the tough Irish guy and personally promised to look after his family if he would enlist, so Davey did," reported Ravenscroft.

Unfortunately for Meehan, he ended up fighting in some of the war's largest battles. He was shot in the face at Bull Run; shot in the right knee at Fredericksburg; and shot in the left hand at Gettysburg. "Then, just a few months shy of being discharged, he was captured in the Battle of the Wilderness and sent to Andersonville, which was the worst place you could end up as a prisoner during the Civil War," Ravenscroft said. While Meehan was released in 1865, he returned to Duxbury a different man. The child his wife was expecting when he had left for war had died before he returned. He had two more children with Laura, but she died when the youngest was only two years old in 1870. After her death, Meehan let the Sheldon family on Washington St. adopt his young children. His older daughter, Mary, went to apprentice with the Winsor family on Washington St. Meehan then married Angeline Lewis Briggs in 1872 and moved to Connecticut, where he had three more children. His war injuries made employment difficult and Meehan eventually died in 1909 in Boston. Ravenscroft next introduced the group to Laurence Bradford (1842-1909) He was the son of the Rev. Claudius and Maria Bradford of Bridgewater. Bradford came to town because of a family homestead and ended up developing Abrams Hill, among other parts of town. His grandparents lived on Harrison Street, which backed up to his aunt's house. "He was planning to attend Harvard like his father, who was an abolitionist, but in 1851, his dad gave a fiery sermon denouncing the United States government, saying that God's law was higher and that slavery needed to end," she recounted. "The congregation turned their backs on him and he was out of a job and basically unemployable, so the family's financial situation changed dramatically." And so, Laurence Bradford went to sea at

age 15 and joined the Navy when the Civil War started. When he returned, he went to the Lowell Institute, MIT's night school, and became a civil engineer. Bradford settled in Duxbury, married Hattie Phipps of Kingston and had two sons. He became owner of the Bradford House in 1893 and was involved in many Duxbury organizations.

"This was a time when people in Boston realized that Duxbury was a perfect summer playground and the train was built for them to get here easily," Ravenscroft explained. "We had the beach, plenty of land, and no factories to detract from the town's natural beauty." It was during this time that the Miles Standish Hotel was erected and the Miles Standish Monument was built as a tourist attraction. In addition, there were 250 cottage lots on Duxbury Beach.

Bradford used his vast knowledge of the town's development to write a book, "Historic Duxbury in Plymouth County," in 1902. In addition, he designed the town's seal, which is still used today.

Henry Fish's (1853-1926) grave was the last stop on the tour. Fish literally came to Duxbury on the train in 1881 as an employee of the Old Colony Railroad. Born in New Ipswich, he moved his wife, Alice, and two girls here and purchased a farm on Depot St.

"Henry Fish was a bit of a Renaissance man," said Ravenscroft. He supplemented his income with photography, manufacturing brooms and brushes and selling farm equipment. From 1907-1915, he was Duxbury's tree warden. "It was most likely in this capacity that he discovered many cellar holes and pathways and he became fascinated with these depressions that were still visible on the ground," she said. When he became too ill to work due to arthritis, he spent his time talking to locals about what he had seen and he did his own deed research without his wife's knowledge. He then produced a 17-page pamphlet, according to Ravenscroft, and had it printed.

"Alice was furious," Ravenscroft told the crowd, "but she ended up selling it to tourists for \$1 each to make extra money."

Ravenscroft was quick to point out that Fish's pamphlet is still one of her greatest resources in the Drew Archives. "He may have been an amateur historian, but it is because of his research that so much of our history remains accessible today."

Concluding the tour Ravenscroft said: "And so we come full circle, back to the love of history which is what brought us all here today in this cemetery."